

I'ma get all the things I like by LucyBrown45

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Summary:

Billy looks at his watch. It's not the one with the leather strap that Steve has seen him take off before basketball. It glints silver in the fresh morning.

“Sit up front. I'll take us to Hewey's.”

“Don't tell me what to do. Also. No.”

“No?”

“No. I've had breakfast.”

“So? You don't want coffee?”

“No.”

Steve rubs his thumb over his cold lips. “Hot chocolate?”

I'ma get all the things I like

Steve's not a violent guy. He's not aggressive. He doesn't get angry. Anger's a split-second emotion and Steve thinks too long about things to get angry. Frustrated, sure. Irritated, yeah. Nobody gives him any credit for that slow burn.

It meant he was a bad shot. Gave it away freely 'cause school and camp and team sports taught him that fighting isn't really the answer to anything. It gets boring real quick watching pre-teen boys toss sweaty slaps at each other. Pathetic.

And anyway, Aunt Katie didn't bring him up to go around slugging it out in alleys. And now. Steve has been in more punch-ups than he'd like to admit to her. Mom knows, but Steve's mom is like a sister who won't rat him out to Aunt Katie. Flicking at her pocketbook asking if she should speak to anybody. Lending him pressed powder.

But, Steve thinks his dad probably wouldn't care. Or would care too much and wonder why Steve lost every fight he got into. Steve wonders if dad is. Violent. He's Steve's hero in a lot of ways. Masculine. Hardy. But not, something Steve would choose. Only partly-palatable. Like *Old Spice*.

He's dead formal in his 1960s suits that still look smart. He's slim, but people pay attention when he speaks. A sombre voice that draws eyes to his neat hair, shined shoes, his gold signet ring. And Steve trusts him even if he doesn't always like him.

He respects him too, 'cause dad was in Vietnam. Which, is. Steve doesn't even know how to understand that. Dad doesn't talk about it other than to rant about what bullshit Regan is. Aunt Katie rolling her eyes at Steve's mom like they're in on some joke about how best to handle boys. But, veterans deserve respect.

Steve's not dumb. All the time. He listens in school. Mostly. He knows that Vietnam wasn't great. So, he doesn't condone abuse or whatever. Like, if dad hit-threatened Mom, or worse. Aunt Katie. Steve would freak the fuck out.

The thing is Billy's got a big stupid mouth. And, maybe. Steve's not saying anyone deserves to get smacked about. But, maybe, Billy needs a bit of a reminder. A top-up from back in October. That he's not in charge all the time. That he can't just throw his weight around making demands.

And Steve thinks maybe. People. Some people agree with this snide secret.

Billy's a bad kid. A bad fucking kid. Always in the school office. Like if Steve behaved the way Billy did, dad probably wouldn't hesitate to give him a swift spank. Steve thought dad might have, the night after Barb died. But just. "Steven, the television's off limits for now. Pass your credit card to your mother, please." But just. Too slow for anger, like Steve. Maybe.

Adults are the only ones willing to put up with Billy. Coach lets him get away with commandeering basketball practice. Miss Ruthie, the administrator, offers him a tissue and soda every time he's called up. Steve's literally had Karen Wheeler tell him what a nice boy Billy is. And that is not true.

Billy's not nice. Steve's seen the jocks drift away from Billy at lunch. Noticed that Nicole and Melanie no longer clamour to sit in the seat next to him in English. Kids at school are scared of him. Maybe.

'Cause Steve knows that Billy could easily kill him. No problem. But less because of the bulk that is Billy's five foot eight frame, and more because Billy's a fucking weirdo.

"Hey. Hey, Carol. Carol."

"What?"

"You ever see any white-tails? Over Judah's Peak?"

"What?"

"I said. Gimme a pen."

He's a spoilt fucking brat and if Steve is sick of the sight of him. And his creepy eyes. Jesus Christ, if Steve feels this way, Max must feel it

ten-fold. Not that she gives much indication. Not that Steve thinks anyone should get hurt. Not that it's actually his problem.

Just that. Steve's seen Mr Hargrove. And Mr Hargrove seems like the kinda guy who really is willing to hand out a spanking. Thin moustache like a cartoon villain. So maybe. There's one adult who doesn't put up with Billy's crap.

On the other hand. Steve's only ever seen Mr Hargrove with Billy and Max and Max's mom in tow. At weekends, when he's able to escape Dustin's clatter-chatter and whatever it is that Nancy and Jonathan expect of him.

Blissful. Alone time. Getting stoned in his car, going to the matinee movies just to be distracted. Later, sitting on the hood of his car parked outside Melvald's, brainlessly chain-smoking. Thumbing the pages of the local paper without looking. Two PM. Two AM. Whatever.

Steve is distantly aware that Max isn't allowed to hang out with the kids at the weekend. One Saturday, he's picking through brands of pancake mix at the Food Co. and the Hargroves catch in his periphery. The sound of Dustin cracking his knuckles snickers across the back of his brain as he watches. Billy holding onto one edge of the grocery cart and Max the other.

Mr Hargrove steadily pushing it over the dimpled linoleum. The kids marching obediently either side. Like guards to generic brand cereal and Wonder bread. Steve couldn't figure it for jack. Big ol' Billy, chunky silver ring flexed around the metal wire frame. Looking away from his dad and Max.

With the cart just about full, Mrs Hargrove kisses Mr Hargrove on the cheek, kisses Max on the head and pats Billy's hand where it stays put, gripping tight. He ignores her. His dad glaring at the side of his neck. She smoothes her tabard down, adjusts her nametag, and goes to clock in.

Steve avoids her check-out. Gets his *Hungry Jack* box and his ego dented by Christy and her mean smile instead.

Mom approves of the Hargrove family in a way that Steve allows 'cause it's his mom and not some soppy adult fawning over Billy's blonde curls and Max's long red hair. "Steven, that Mrs Hargrove is a good woman. Hard worker." Deep southern drawl tumbling, that no one ever expects to come from her mouth.

Steve becomes strange witness to the Hargrove family time. Serious family time. They do the same thing every week. Every goddamn weekend. They stop in at the Food Co., cashing in Mrs Hargrove's employee discount, Saturday morning before her shift.

Then, Mr Hargrove takes Max and Billy home. They don't emerge again. And while Steve is aware that it is super inappropriate for him to have lurked long enough to know that, he isn't creepy enough yet to peer in at the window.

On Sundays, they go to church. Which Steve thinks mom probably knows. She's a sucker for that. They eat lunch at Merrells and in the afternoon, Steve watches them walk the park. Loop the perimeter for hours. Near silently. In Sunday best.

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Steve recognises Billy's smart dress shoes when he nearly trips over them. Steve's been sent to the school office for a tardy slip. He wasn't even that late, but Mrs Sherman is a hardass. Monday's already grating on him so he doesn't expect to go hurtling over Billy Hargrove's out-stretched legs.

Billy flinches, bucked out of a half-doze at the ruckus. Doesn't bother to draw his legs in, but pushes his aviators up on top of his head. Sticks his chin out at Steve. "You want something?"

Steve's mouth hangs open. Unthinkingly put his hands on his hips. Wishes he hadn't. He knows how prissy he looks when he does that. But he is. He is prissy. He's fucking tired and Billy Hargrove's got the nerve. He scoffs. "Err. Yeah."

The nerve to be taking up all the room.

"Yeah?"

Steve's disbelieving breath clenches angrily in the back of his throat. A prissy noise. Shakes his head. "Jesus."

Miss Ruthie is an actual teen girl despite her blue cardigan, grandma glasses, and twenty years behind the desk. She shuffles past Steve's shoulder to hand Billy a hot chocolate outta the vending machine. "Steve. Tardy slip?"

He stares at her and ignores Billy sniggering. "Sure." Throws his hands up in the air and follows her. She frowns at him for his attitude, but it's clearly too early even for her to pick that battle.

Once she's written the pink sheet of paper out for him he has to take a seat next to Billy to wait his turn to see the Vice Principle. He makes a big fuss setting himself down in the little plastic chair and Billy raises a thick eyebrow at him.

Steve sighs loudly and Billy nudges the toe of his shoe into Steve calf. "Shuddup, man."

"Shuddup yourself." Steve swipes a palm at him half-heartedly. He sighs again. Rests his elbows on his knees. Catching sight of the shine of Billy's shoes, he looks up, behind him at Billy's smirking mouth. "Why are wearing church shoes?"

Billy's face falls. Tucks his feet under the chair. "I'm not."

Steve grins. "Yeah. You are." Points at the floor. "Where are your boots?"

"Shut the fuck up."

"You're kidding, right? You're not gonna tell me why you're wearing church shoes and jeans. To school?"

"You gonna tell me why you think a normal pair of shoes are church shoes?"

Steve sits back in his seat. Neck awkwardly turned so he can look at Billy. "You wear a pendant, doofus." He prods his index finger at Billy's bare chest.

Familiar, like. He draws his hand back, rubs it over the healing cut near his earlobe.

Billy twists, bends forward. Sits like Steve was moments before. “How’s your face?”

Steve thinks about it. “Fine.” And. It is, it is fine. No worse than any other scrap he got bested in.

Billy looks over his shoulder at him. “Yeah. But you’re a liar.” He stands up. Stands in front of Steve. Brushes a finger over his own cheekbone. Considering the yellowing bruise still dappled over Steve’s cheek.

Vice Principle Curtis opens the office door. “Ah, Billy, son. Come in.” He makes a beckoning motion with his hand. That teacher smile rolled between his lips.

Son. Bad guy Billy Hargrove, son. As though Curtis hasn’t seen Billy put his fist through a classroom wall. Hasn’t seen Billy tell Justin Marsh to go get raped. Son. No son Steve would ever want to be.

Billy nods graciously and follows, narrowed blue gaze lingering on Steve. Pinches his nose and ducks his head dismissively. Dressy church shoes clicking on the old parquet floor. They’re definitely the shoes Billy wears to St Luke’s.

Last Sunday, he’d seen Billy crouched over in the church parking lot, pretending to tie his laces, sucking on an unlit cigarette as his family walked inside. Getting up and tucking it into the breast pocket of his neat, tailored blazer. They’re stupid shiny.

He’d almost looked. Like a good guy. But Billy doesn’t. He looks like a twenty-three year old Hollywood paid to act his way through teenhood. Steve can’t tell if that’s how everyone from Cali looks. All bright eyes and perfect abs.

And geez. Billy’s lashes and his hair and his body. Steve’s had this strobe light thought before. Doesn’t know what to focus on, how to illuminate the whole. Where he could point the camera and find the boy. The fucking. Peer. Steve knows Billy must be.

Billy's in with Curtis a longass time. So when he reappears, Steve's made up his mind. He grabs Billy by the forearm as he goes to walk past him without acknowledgement. "Hey. You busy tonight?"

He wrenches his arm out of Steve's grip, pulls it across his body like he might shove in back into Steve's chest. Mr Curtis calls Steve's name. Billy sticks his nose in the air. "Yeah." Licks his teeth and stalks away.

After school, Steve is leant against his car door, arms folded, partly listening as Nancy tells him about some British band Jonathan likes. He's looking over her head, hoping she doesn't notice. Across the parking lot, Billy's sat on the hood of his Camaro waiting for Max.

Billy's watching him back. Face still. Heels of his shoes bumping against his front tyre. His jeans have risen up his ankles and even this far apart, Steve can see he's got on striped gym socks. They don't have gym or basketball practice on Mondays.

Steve pulls his lighter out of his pocket. It's empty, but he flicks the wheel.

"You want mine?"

He looks down at Nancy, eyebrows startled up under his bangs. "Nah. I'm good." He is. Edges his teeth around his middle fingernail.

"Steve!" Christ. Anyone under the age of. Fourteen, Steve decides. Should have their voiceboxes fixed at a reasonable volume.

"Jesus, Dustin. Yes?"

Max and Lucas are stood behind him. Nominated spokesperson.

"It's Monday." Duh, silent. Dripping from Dustin's outstretched palms.

"So?" The side of Steve's mouth tugs up, eye squinting. Bemused.

Nancy folds her arms. Looks over at Jonathan's car. Mike and Will are sat in the backseat. She nudges her bicep into Steve's. "Arcade afternoon." Her eyes heaven-ward.

Steve's head tips back. He groans. "Jesus." Their little faces. Faux-angelic. Swipes his hand in the direction of the back seat. "Come on then." They grin at him and too excited for something so simple, they scramble in.

Nancy smiles. Waves at them as she walks over to the Jonathan. Steve catches Billy's eye. He blows cigarette smoke from his mouth, curling over his chin. Doesn't move, doesn't shout out as he watches Max do the opposite of what she's meant to.

Steve leans down through the open door. "Max. Is Billy waiting for you?"

She rolls her eyes and gets out the other side of the car. She sticks her arm in the air and waves at Billy. He doesn't move. "Hey!" She's louder than Dustin.

Steve winces at the same time Lucas does. Steve turns to face in Billy's direction.

"Hey!" Max waves her arm forcefully from side to side.

Billy looks. Side to side. As though somebody might catch him caring about this. He slides off his car and slowly makes his way over. Lion-like. He doesn't walk over to Max. He stands too close to Steve. Speaks so lowly that it's clear his message is for Steve and not his step-sister. "I'll pick her up at six."

Steve is taller than Billy. A fact that doesn't really do him any favours. It seems to be another thing that pisses Billy off. But, at this angle, all Steve can see are Billy's pink cheeks from the fall breeze, the soft bow of his top lip. His dark brows that make Steve think soon, his hair will go dark too, out of the California sun.

"At the arcade."

Billy smirks. "Yeah, pretty boy. The arcade."

Driving away, Steve wonders if now he has Max in his car if that means that Billy is no longer busy. It's not like he's got friends to hang out with. Steve's in no position of power on that one, but still. Maybe he needs to buy new boots. Max interrupts his thoughts. "He's

a dick.”

“Err, yeah, Max. We know.” Lucas doesn’t beat around the bush.

“Shuddup, Lucas. I still have to live with him.” Steve glances in his rear-view mirror. Sees her slouched in her seat, pouting. “It’s exhausting.”

“Brave soul.”

“Shuddup, Dustin.”

“Wha’? I’m serious.”

Max reaches over and flicks Dustin on the nose. So Steve’s got nothing to lose. “Is he. Erm. Going downtown?”

“What?”

Steve clears his throat, shrugs his shoulders. “Goodman’s? For boots?”

Max scoffs. “No. Are you kidding? He’s got like, a million.”

“Really?” Doesn’t look like it to Steve.

“Yah-huh. His dad is always buying him stuff.” She folds her arms. “But when I want a new board, it’s all, ‘Be patient, Maxine. It’s Christmas soon.’”

Dustin nearly gets his fist into the side of Steve’s head. “Oh-ah, yes! Let’s talk Masters of the Universe.” And they’re off. Whining and bickering about figurines and VHS tapes and shit they want under the tree this year.

He gets them to the arcade, and Steve is thankful it didn’t take longer ‘cause as much as he. Likes them. Their buzz can get a bit. They’re a handful. He nods at Nancy and Jonathan as they drive by.

Steve’s fingers tap on the wheel. Digs a carton of cigarettes outta his pocket. Finds a spare lighter in the glove compartment. Rolls his window all the way down and hangs his arm out, smoke drifting into

the fall air.

He's glad for the peace, but. This feeling keeps sneaking up on him. He doesn't know what to do with this. He doesn't want to say loneliness. He's not lonely. He's alone, sure. But not lonely. He feels dumb about it. Wanting to be around people and then immediately wanting to be by himself.

It's like. A boredom. Of sorts. It thrums, pins and needles like in the joint of his elbows. Makes his knees twinge. Knowing they need to be occupied.

He flicks his cigarette butt away and speeds outta the lot.

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The Hawkins rec' centre is a pit. It's really just an old Scouts hall with a boxing ring. A half-size, crumbling tarmac basketball court adjacent to the scrubby bit of land behind it. Nobody goes there. At least. Not to work out.

Steve finds Billy, sans shoes. Sat on the filthy stage, arms hung over the lowest rope. Unlit cigarette snug between his lips. He doesn't say anything as Steve walks in through the open fire door.

Billy is actually sat on a folded tartan picnic blanket. He makes an odd picture. Feet swinging in slouchy gym socks, long hair tangling gently in the lapel of his denim jacket.

“Hey.”

“What.” Billy speaks around the cigarette, voice barely leaving his mouth.

Steve climbs up onto the ring. Clumsily tumbles through the middle ropes. Ignores Billy rolling his eyes at him. He bounces on the stretched surface. He hasn't been up on it since he was a kid. Likes the motion of it.

He slumps down on the blanket. Limbs jostling.

“Jesus.” Billy pulls the cigarette out from his mouth and taps it in his

top pocket. “Why’re you so close to me?” He shuffles his thighs, puts his hands in his lap.

Steve tamps his hands down, across the wool to the grimy canvas. Looks at the peeling posters for wrestling club. Grins. Sardonic. “This is nice.”

“Fuck off.”

“What’re you doing here, man?”

“Is it common knowledge?” Billy twists to face Steve. “That you’re this fucking nosy?” He leans back on the palm of his hand. “Could somebody have fucking warned me?”

“That’s three questions in a row, bud’. Who’s nosy now?”

Billy’s glare is hard to look away from. “Seriously. Fuck off.”

Steve kicks his heels. Sways his legs side to side. Nudges at Billy’s calf. Antagonising. “Where are your shoes?”

Billy tilts his head into the shoulder of the arm he’s leant on. “Somewhere.”

“Fine.” Steve chews in the inside of his cheek. “You hungry?”

Billy snaps his tongue on the roof of his mouth. Looks towards the dust motes sea-drifting through the sunlight from the doorway. “Sure.”

Steve follows him outside. Squinting at the late afternoon light. “Where’s your car?”

Billy stands with his hands in his pockets. Rocks back on his heels. Turns his toes out. Second position. Seemingly unfased by his missing affects. Doesn’t bother to answer as he swats at the crumbs on the passenger side of Steve’s BMW before slipping in.

Christ. Billy never shuts the hell up. Always taking up a storm of weird shit. Or pricking at eyespy details to start a fight. So what. He’s taken a vow of silence. His voice wandered off with his shoes and his

car.

Given Billy's lack of appropriate footwear, Steve figures best to eat at his house. He's fast regretting it. Billy's nose wrinkled as he prowls around the Harrington kitchen. Shuffling packets in cupboards. Pushing aside packs of *Mallowmars*, *Oreos*, *Pringles*. Biting down savagely into an apple and asking, "Peanut butter?"

Steve huffs and stalks off to the pantry. Comes back to find Billy peeking at the unlatched dishwasher, pulling it open to retrieve a clean knife. He takes the jar from Steve and heaps Skippy over his half chewed apple.

They stare at each other. Billy's molars chomping, looking childish with bulging hamster cheeks. Steve hops up on the stool at the breakfast counter and watches as Billy continues to mooch through drawers. Prod at gold-rimmed china, loudly pours a glass of lemonade from the pitcher.

He gnaws his straight front teeth along the core. Tosses it into the trash and shrugs. "I'm gonna do homework now."

Steve is baffled. He reluctantly patters behind Billy down the corridor to the lounge. Stands next to the china display cabinet as he finds out what homework means. Watches Billy make himself at home. Setting his glass on a coaster. Switching the TV on.

Rearranging the couch cushions. Cross-legged, he's drags one of the heavy square goose-feather pillows from the corner chaise into his lap and hugs it to his tummy. Grabs one of the decorative pale blue pillows from the ottoman, places it behind his head.

A small king.

"You comfortable?"

Billy ignores him as he sits down next to him. Just carries on watching *Hour Magazine*. Steve hates this show. Looks around the room. Seeing it through the discomfort of having a stranger occupying the space. Aunt Katie would hate the new. Damn ugly painting mom's put up.

It's a replica of something. It's all dark browns and yellow swathes of dead sunlight. It doesn't co-ordinate well with the room. Dad doesn't care. But Steve knows. That Aunt Katie would. So it's a shame. A shame that she's not here to protect the room from its looming presence.

Steve turns away from it. Looks at Billy taking tiny, polite sips of his lemonade. Squeezing the pillow he's claimed. Steve is being a bad host. He should go get chips or something. But Billy looks real fucking content and he's sort of scared of breaking that.

Not scared. Just. It's nice. Steve figures. For the first time in a long time, he doesn't want to pull his eyelashes out at the thought of being around another human for an extended period of time. It would be a shame to disrupt that.

He leans forward to pull his sneakers off at the same time as Billy abruptly gets up. "I gotta call my mom."

"Okay." Steve still has his fingers tucked into the back of his *Nikes*, his chest still pressed to his knees. His mouth open over the y, as Billy wanders out into the hall. Steve hears him settle on the little satin seat at the telephone table and start dialling.

He stretches his legs out into the space Billy was, leaning back against the armrest. Crosses his ankles. Bites at the peeling skin around his cuticles. Listen to the soft mumble of Billy's voice.

"Yeah. No, it's fine.

"She's fine.

"They're fine.

"It's nice. I guess.

"I love you too."

Billy turns up, not four minutes into the start of *Love Boat* with a peeled banana half way in his mouth. He clammers over Steve's legs. Sits so that his knees fall over Steve's shins. "I gotta call her every day. Five o'clock."

Steve tries not to grimace at the squelch of soft fruit under Billy's tongue. Shrugs. "Sure."

Billy swallows. Eyes narrowed at Steve. Suspicious. "Where's your mom?"

"Why?"

"Cause." Billy's lashes flutter as he notices and scans the painting behind Steve. His eyeline hovers around Steve's cheek. "Won't your daddy want dinner on the table?" He bites the tip of his tongue between his front teeth.

He's teasing. But maybe not.

Steve's not sure what he's thinking when he presses the pad of his index finger to the sliver of flesh. But it works, Billy tucking it away behind his soft lips. It surprises Steve into murmuring, "Shhh."

Billy minutely nods his head. The tip of Steve's nail tucking under his top lip. Steve doesn't move. Billy opens his mouth just a fraction. Lets Steve run his finger across his gum, nudging against the frenum. Slick. Healthy red. Billy breath is warm.

The laugh track from the TV is loud in hush between them.

Billy's eyes match the Celeste blue of the wallpaper. Steve spreads his fingers, forefinger leaving Billy's mouth, pressing a firm line against the side of his nose. Scratches his middle finger along the arch of his brow. He moves his hand, cups Billy's jaw. Drags his thumb from the inner corner of Billy's eye. Rough, over the sleep tracking purple there.

Whispers, "Yeah?"

Billy jerks his head back. Shoves his palm into Steve's chest. Frowning before focusing back on the adventures of Captain Merrill Stubing. He hums. Kneads his fingertips into the blue cushion that's fallen between Steve's knee and the back of the couch. "Yeah."

“So you’ll pick me up.”

It’s early. Way earlier than anyone would think to call Steve. He’s not seen his parents in four days. It’s real frosty for November. He’d leant Billy some old *Converse* to walk home in. He hadn’t wanted to go with Steve to collect Max from the arcade and Steve couldn’t convince him.

She’d been so vexed by it, Steve hadn’t known what to do, but drive faster. Her over-reaction such a surprise, it had sent Steve’s temperature flash burning. Fingers picking at the skin at his temple.

“Sure. I can.”

“You can?”

“Hmm. I can. Will I?”

“Yeah. Fucking be here.”

Steve doesn’t beep when he pulls up outside the Hargrove household. Keeps the engine running. Feels like stripping his bottom lip of the dry skin there when he sees Mr Hargrove step up to his car.

He gets out. “Hello, sir.”

“Steven.” Mr Hargrove reaches for Steve’s hand, gives it a solid shake. “Maxine is feeling. Delicate, today. I appreciate your help.”

Steve risks glancing at the porch. Billy and Max are stood in the doorway, looking glum. Max’s hair is in two tight French braids and Billy’s wearing a neat black jacket, lined with some kinda downy-soft fur. It looks new. Steve can’t tell if he’s seen Billy’s boots before.

“Err. Yeah. Of course, Mr Hargrove.”

Mr Hargrove squints at him. Maybe, like he wants to tell Steve how that isn’t quite polite enough. “You drive safe.”

He pats the roof of the car as the three of them get in. Leans down to look in at Steve’s window. Taps the glass. “Have a good day.”

Steve figures Billy is trying to piss him off. Just a bit. 'Cause he's sat in the back with Max, like Steve's a fucking chauffeur for the Hargroves. He snatches a peak in his rear-view mirror. Billy's got his chin nestled into his chest.

"A.V club today, Max?"

She looks quickly at Billy. "Yeah. I guess."

Billy ignores her.

Steve rubs his forehead, fingers edging into his hairline under his woollen hat. "I. Erm. I'm picking Dustin up, if you need a ride."

"Thanks."

She says it again when Steve pulls the car into park outside the high school. Her voice clear with relief as she bounds away to where Will is waiting for her.

Steve turns in his seat, hand on the back of the passenger headrest. "We're real early."

Billy looks at his watch. It's not the one with the leather strap that Steve has seen him take off before basketball. It glints silver in the fresh morning.

"Sit up front. I'll take us to Hewey's."

"Don't tell me what to do. Also. No."

"No?"

"No. I've had breakfast."

"So? You don't want coffee?"

"No."

Steve rubs his thumb over his cold lips. "Hot chocolate?"

The smoky smell of fall breathes out as Billy opens the door, breathes in Billy's cologne with the too early snap of winter as he sits heavily

next to Steve. Folds his arms. Stares at Steve expectantly.

Steve clicks his tongue against the roof of his mouth. Puts his hands back on the wheel.

Hewey may or may not still own Hewey's canteen. Steve isn't sure. But it's a short hop away from school and once. They made oatmeal with peanut butter for Steve. Even when it wasn't on the menu.

Inside, Billy immediately heads towards a booth at the back. Steve checks his back pocket for his wallet. Lucky. He picks up a tray and slides it along the metal counter. He orders two large hot chocolates. With cream. Orders an omelette. 'Cause Aunt Katie would want him to. Grabs a banana outta the bowl by the cash register. Just in case.

As he approaches the table, Billy half-stands reaching for their drinks. Milk sloshing.

"Jesus. That's not helping."

"Why are you sitting next to me." Billy slurps at his drink. Knows that Hewey's tops up with milk from the fridge. Gestures to the other side of the table with the mug gripped between his thick fingers. "Sit over there."

"I wanna watch." Steve tugs his parker off.

"Watch what?"

Steve waves his hand across the room. "The people."

Billy looks at him like he's lost his mind. "We're the only people here."

"Just. Shut up. Okay." He unwraps his knife and fork from the flimsy napkin and begins to eat. The skin at the corners of his mouth cracks painfully.

"This for me?" Billy stretches his arm across Steve's plate for the banana.

"Watchit. Sheesh. Yes. That's for you."

Billy peels it. Dips it into his hot chocolate and takes a bite.

Steve stares at him. Part disgusted. Milk drips down his chin.

“Take your coat off, man. You’re gonna get it messed up.”

Mouth full, Billy mangles, “F’ck ‘ff.” Swallows loudly. “I’m not a kid.” He combs at the fine fluff of the collar. “And. It’s fucking cold in here.” He coughs. “You know you passed a dead deer?”

“What? No. When?”

“On the way to school. It’s been there since Friday.”

“No. Highway patrol woulda picked it up.”

Billy shrugs. “Maybe the rangers should.”

“Rangers?”

“Yeah. Judah’s Peak.”

“What?”

Billy finishes his banana. Talks slowly, as though maybe. Steve is dumb. “National park.”

Steve shakes his head. “It’s not a national park. It’s hunting ground.”

“Well. Fuck me then.”

Steve pushes his fork through his half-eaten omelette. “You wanna ditch?” Raises an eyebrow at Billy. “Go up there?”

“And get shot at by some hillbilly? No thanks.”

“No.” Steve itches at his Adam’s apple under his sweater. Eyes roving sarcastically to the side. “You park up on the peak. You can see the deer from there.”

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Steve hasn’t been up this way for a while. Billy’s not totally wrong

about the hillbillies. But still. The view is nice.

“C’mon. Come sit on the bench.”

“I’m not doing that.”

“Why not?”

“Cause it’s cold, Harrington.”

“Jesus. Don’t be a bitch.”

Billy is fucking fussy. Like more than any girl, Steve’s hung out with. Not that Steve thinks Billy is a girl. Just that. Girl’s are fussy. And Steve’s not sure that Billy really has the right to be. Steve still thinks Billy could do with a telling-off.

Surveying the valley below, he counts three does and a bird he can’t name before Billy joins him on the rock-carved lookout spot.

He pulls at Steve’s sleeve where it pokes out from the cuff of his jacket. “That’s a fucking ugly sweater, by the way.”

“Thanks.”

He returns the favour by pulling at the gold hoop in Billy’s ear. “Stupid.” His fingers drift, curling around the outer shell. A strand of hair loops its way around his knuckles.

Billy ducks his head, pushes his index fingers against his temples, tucking his curls away and dislodging Steve’s touch.

“Yeah.” He unzips his ostentatious coat and from his inside pocket pulls out a tube of chapstick. Passes it to Steve. “But I like it.” He nudges Steve’s elbow to get him to use it. “You hate your sweater.”

Steve’s voice slants sideways as he applies lipbalm. “Yeah?”

“Hmm-hm.”

Steve rolls his lips together. Looks down at the triangle of red sweater visible. Considers it. Spies another doe. “Maybe.” Nancy likes red, he

realises.

He gives the tube back to Billy. Steve decides he's more a blue kinda guy.

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Unlike dad, mom can't hold Steve's attention. He loves her. Obviously. She's just.

She says, "I saw Mrs Hargrove in Danesville, yesterday."

His gaze has drifted towards the painting behind her. She said it was an official replica of something. Steve doesn't know how something can be an official replica.

"Oh."

"Steven." She taps her hand on his knee. "Danesville. I was Christmas shopping." Sips her tea.

Love Boat is jabbering away, making Steve feel jittery. He pinches the tail of his eyebrow between his forefinger and thumb.

"Right."

"She bought a lovely Pauline dolly for Maxine."

Steve always forgets to turn the overhead light on in the lounge. The big chandelier too much when it's just him. Mom's got it on now though and in the aching light, the painting untangles. Fleeing bucks from the limbs of trees. Their syrup coloured fur glistening with sweat fear.

"Oh dear."

Mom frowns at him. "Anyway. I said to her. I said, 'it must be hard buying for William. Boys are so difficult to buy for.'"

Steve thinks that maybe Mrs Hargrove is just a bad present buyer, if her selection for Max was anything to go by.

“I said, ‘you let me know if I can help’.”

Steve thinks about the presents he’s received in recent years. Mostly, just mini or cheaper versions of the same things mom buys dad. She’d got him that nice book on American flora and fauna though. It’s more pictures than text.

“Mrs Hargrove. She says, ‘oh. No need. Neil buys all Billy’s gifts.’ Can you imagine, Steven? Can you imagine? Her sending her husband out Christmas shopping for the children like that.”

Steve thinks about how his mom is one of eight sisters. And she’s the only one left. And how sometimes she talks with a strange sort of old-world universalism. How she envisages Neil possibly having to buy a tape or something for Billy as the equivalent to her own father choosing eight matching sets of church gloves on Christmas Eve.

How it doesn’t even cross her mind to ask dad out to pick something nice for Steve.

“Steven.”

“Um. Yeah. No. That’s bad.” He roughs his palms over his knees. “Mom. You still want Chanel for Christmas?”

She cups his cheek. Presses the pad of her thumb under his eye. Tilts her head. “Darling. Christmas is for family, not presents.”

“Right.” Steve wishes Aunt Katie were here. “I have to go.”

“Steven, please.”

He kisses the top of her head. Thick blonde hair hairspray crackled.

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On the shoddy basketball court at the rec’ centre, Billy’s shooting baskets. The day’s been bright, but not especially warm. Billy’s hoodie sticks to his back with sweat. He’s got Steve’s *Converse* on.

Steve jogs over, reaches around Billy’s hips for the ball. Misses. Obviously. Grins at the sound of Billy cackling.

Billy dribbles isosceles to Steve. Throws the ball over his left shoulder. The ball rebounds off the rim of the net. Steve hisses and Billy wrinkles his nose.

“You got something nice for me, pretty boy?”

“Maybe.” Steve holds Billy’s wrist in his hand. Places an orange in the curve of his palm before chasing after the ball in the sleeping-cedar thicket.

Author's Note:

Title from Brockhampton - Boogie